

Drugs, alcohol and mental health

Dual diagnosis

This factsheet explains how using drugs can affect your mental health. It also sets out how you can get help to stop taking drugs if you have a mental illness. In this factsheet, 'drugs' means recreational drugs, alcohol, or prescription drugs. When someone with a mental illness also uses drugs, doctors call this 'dual diagnosis'.



KEY POINTS

- Drugs can make the symptoms of your mental illness worse.
- Some drugs may make it more likely for you to get a mental illness.
- If you have a mental illness and use drugs, doctors sometimes call this 'dual diagnosis'.
- There are many reasons why you might use drugs. Some people use them to try and deal with their symptoms. This is called 'self-medication'.
- Drugs can make your mental illness worse. They can make your illness harder to treat.
- Mental health and drug services should work together to give you the support you need.

This factsheet covers:

1. [How can drugs affect my mental health?](#)
2. [Which drugs can affect my mental health?](#)
3. [How can I get help?](#)
4. [What can I do if I have problems trying to get help?](#)

1. How can drugs affect my mental health?

You may use drugs to help you to deal with the symptoms of your illness. Or you may use them because they make you feel good. Whatever your reason, using drugs can have a long-term negative effect on you. The possible long-term effects include the following.

- Needing to take more to get the same effect
- Feeling like you have to take the drug ('dependence')
- Withdrawal symptoms including feeling sick, cold, sweaty or shaky when you don't take them
- Having sudden mood changes
- Having a negative outlook on life
- Loss of motivation
- Doing less well at work, school, college or university
- Problems with relationships
- Borrowing or stealing money from friends and family
- Being secretive
- Having episodes of psychosis

Using drugs can make it take longer for your mental health to get better. Drugs can make you more unwell and more likely to try and harm yourself or take your own life.¹

Using drugs could give you a mental illness that you didn't have before. For example, research has shown that cannabis can increase your chances of getting schizophrenia.

What does psychosis mean?

Psychosis means losing touch with reality. You may have unusual thoughts or experience things that aren't real. It can be a symptom of mental illness and can also be a short-term effect of some drugs.

You can find more information about '**Psychosis**' at www.rethink.org. Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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2. Which substances can affect my mental health?

In the rest of this factsheet, we look at how drugs could affect your mental health.

Cannabis

(Related words - Dope, Draw, Ganja, Grass, Hash, Herb, Marijuana, Pot, Skunk, Weed)

Some people take cannabis because it makes them feel relaxed or happy. It can also make you feel anxious or experience things that aren't real. This is a sign of psychosis. Doctors sometimes call this 'cannabis-induced psychosis'.

Cannabis is one of the most commonly used drugs in England. About 1 in 20 adults use it. A lot of people start using it when they are around 16 years old, and they tend to use it for longer than other drugs.²

Young people who use cannabis are more likely to get schizophrenia.³ Those who use it regularly are 6 times more likely to get schizophrenia than young people who have not used it.⁴ The risk of getting psychosis is higher if you:

- use it from a young age,
- use it for a long time, or
- use high-strength cannabis, like skunk.⁵

If you have been using cannabis and you feel that it is affecting your health, make an appointment to see your GP as soon as you can. Your doctor should not judge you, and should not tell other people you use drugs.

Alcohol

(Related words - Booze)

Many people with a mental illness have problems using alcohol.⁶ It is easy to get hold of and it is addictive. Drinking alcohol can make you unwell if you have had mental health problems in the past. Doctors call this 'relapse'.

The short-term effects of alcohol depend on how much you drink. In small amounts, alcohol can make you feel more confident and sociable. The more you drink, the more likely it is that you will feel tired, dizzy, confused or unwell.

The long-term effects of alcohol also depend on how much you drink, and how regularly you drink it. If you drink too much on a regular basis then you could cause yourself serious physical and mental harm. Drinking may make it more difficult for you to recover from your mental illness, and may reduce your quality of life.⁷

Legal Highs

'Legal highs' are drugs that you can buy before the government decides if they are dangerous or not. There is often no way of knowing what is in them and what the risks are.

Mephedrone (meow meow, mcat or plantfeed) is an example of a drug that was a legal high but is now illegal. This is because of the effects it

was having on people who took it. Liquid ecstasy (GHB) is another 'legal high' that the government made illegal.

Short-term effects of legal highs depend on what they are. Most are 'uppers' like cocaine or speed. Uppers make you feel energetic and talkative. This is why people may take them at clubs and festivals.

No one knows exactly how legal highs will affect you in the long-term. The drugs are new and so scientists have not done a lot of research. There is evidence that some of these drugs may make you feel worse if you are at risk of having mental health problems.

Amphetamine and methamphetamine

(Related words - Crystal Meth, Tina, Ice, Meth, Phet, Whizz, Speed)

In the short-term, these drugs can make you feel wide awake and talkative. This can make it difficult for you to relax or get to sleep.

In the long-term, amphetamines might make you anxious and depressed. They might make you experience things that aren't real.⁸

When you stop taking the drug, you may feel depressed and you might find it hard to sleep.

Benzodiazepines

(Related words - Benzos, Downers, Tranquilisers, Vallies, Blues)

Sometimes a doctor will tell you to take benzodiazepines to help you with anxiety. People also buy them illegally because of their relaxing effects. They are very very addictive, and so doctors only give them for a short time.

In the short-term, these drugs can make you feel calmer. Depending on the particular type you take, they could make you feel confused or moody. Sometimes they make you experience things that are not there (hallucinations).

In the long-term, some people become addicted. This can have a big effect on their day-to-day life. Some research has shown that if you use benzodiazepines for a long time, your memory or concentration could be affected.⁹

Cocaine

(Related words - Crack, Coke, Charlie, Chang, Snow)

In the short-term, cocaine can make you feel awake, talkative and confident. There is a risk that you could take too much (overdose). You can feel tired and depressed after taking it.

In the long-term, cocaine use can affect how you feel. It can affect your relationships with friends and family. If you use cocaine a lot or become

addicted to it, you are more likely to have ongoing problems with depression, paranoia or anxiety.¹⁰

Ecstasy

(Related words - E, MDMA, Pills, XTC)

In the short-term, ecstasy can make you feel energetic, chatty and like you want to dance. It can sometimes make you feel anxious and confused.

In the long-term, ecstasy may make you feel depressed or anxious.¹¹

Heroin

(Related words - Brown, Gear, H, Smack, Skag)

In the short-term, heroin can make you feel relaxed and calm. It takes away pain and can make you feel sleepy. There is a risk that you could take too much (overdose). You can take it in different ways – some people smoke it and others inject it. If you inject it, you may get infections.

Heroin is a very addictive drug. It can have serious long-term effects. When you stop taking it you may feel depressed and find it hard to sleep. You may feel that heroin becomes more important than other things in your life. This might make it harder to keep a job and affect your relationships.

LSD

(Related words - Acid, Blotter, Trips, Micro-dots)

In the short-term, LSD will make you experience things that aren't real. Sometimes the experience will be enjoyable, and sometimes it will be frightening (a 'bad trip').

There is mixed evidence about the long-term effects of LSD. We don't know exactly how likely it is to cause mental health problems. Recent research has questioned if LSD is actually a big factor, but other studies have suggested that people might become unwell after taking it.

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3. How can I get help?

If you have a mental illness and use drugs, the NHS calls this 'dual diagnosis'. Your local NHS trust may have a policy that says how they will help people with dual diagnosis. Check on their website to see if you can find out more about what to expect locally.

If you are not already getting help with your mental health from your local mental health team, a good first step is to make an appointment to see your GP. Your GP may offer you medication and therapy to treat your mental illness. They may refer you to a drug and alcohol service to help you with your drug use.

If your needs are too complicated for your GP to deal with alone, you might need more specialist support. Mental health services should offer this and work with drug and alcohol services to give you all the help you need.¹² The Department of Health says that people with dual diagnosis are a key group of people who should get from specialist mental health services.¹³

There may be a 'Dual Diagnosis Team' in your area which helps people in your situation. However, not all NHS trusts have them. If there isn't one in your area, you could try contacting your local 'Community Mental Health Team' (CMHT) to see whether they can help you. However, you will need to be referred to the CMHT by your GP.

You can find out more information on www.rethink.org about:

- Community Mental Health Team (CMHT)
- Worried about your mental health?

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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4. What can I do if I have problems trying to get help?

Some people with dual diagnosis have told us that it has been difficult to get the help they need. For example, you may have been told that mental health services cannot help you because of your drink or drugs problem. But the Department of Health is very clear that mental health services should try to help you if you have dual diagnosis. If your mental health team has turned you away, they need to justify this decision. You could try asking them for reasons.

If you are not happy with the services you get, talk to the person in charge of your care. This might be your GP or your 'care coordinator'. They might be able to change things for you. An 'advocate' may be able to help you to get your point of view across.

You can find out more information on www.rethink.org about:

- Advocacy
- Complaints

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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Addaction

Addaction is a drug and alcohol treatment agency. Their services deal primarily with drug and alcohol problems including support for families.

Telephone: 020 7251 5860 (admin).



Address: 67-69 Cowcross Street, London, EC1M 6PU
Email: info@addaction.org.uk
Website: www.addaction.org.uk

Adfam

This is a national charity for families and friends of drug users. It offers confidential support and information.

Telephone: 020 7553 7640 (admin)
Address: 25 Corsham Street, London , N1 6DR
Email: admin@adfam.org.uk
Website: www.adfam.org.uk

Al-Anon Family Groups

This is a service for families and friends of alcoholics. Al-Anon family groups provide understanding, strength and hope to anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking.

Telephone: 020 7403 0888 (helpline) Open 10am-10pm, 365 days a year
Address: Al-Anon Family Groups, 57B Great Suffolk Street, London, SE1 0BB
Website: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Alcohol Concern

Alcohol concern is the national organisation for alcohol misuse. It does not provide services but they do produce information on alcohol.

Telephone: 0207 566 9800 (admin)
Address: 25 Corsham Street, London , N1 6DR
Email: contact@alcoholconcern.org.uk
Website: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

AA provides an opportunity for people to get together to solve their problem with alcohol and help others to recover.

Telephone: 0800 9177 650 (helpline)
Address: PO Box 1, 10 Toft Green, York, YO1 7NJ
Email: help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
Website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Cocaine Anonymous (CA)

CA is a fellowship of men and women who use the 12 step, self-help programme to stop cocaine and all other mind-altering substances.

Telephone: 0800 612 0225 (helpline) 10am – 10pm daily

Address: C.A.U.K Talbot House, 204-226 Imperial Way, Rayners Lane, Harrow, HA2 7HH, United Kingdom
Email: wtf@cauk.org.uk
Website: www.cauk.org.uk

Narcotics Anonymous UK (NAUK)

NA is a non-profit fellowship or society of men and women for whom drugs had become a major problem. They are recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean. They have groups around the country.

Helpline: 0300 999 1212 (10a.m – Midnight)
Website: <http://ukna.org/>

Drinkline

This is the national alcohol helpline. They provide information and self-help materials for callers worried about their own drinking, and to support the family and friends of people who are drinking. They are confidential, you do not have to give your name and they can provide advice on where to get help.

Telephone: 0800 917 8282 (helpline) (weekdays 9am – 8pm, weekends 11am – 4pm)

DrugScope

Drug Scope provides information and publications on a wide range of drug related topics.

Telephone: 07712 529936 (admin)
Address: DrugScope, 4th Floor, Asra House, 1 Long Lane, London, SE1 4PG
Email: info@drugscope.org.uk
Website: www.drugscope.org.uk

Frank

Frank provides information and advice on drugs to anyone concerned about drugs and solvent misuse, including people misusing drugs, their families, friends and carers.

Telephone: 0800 77 66 00 (helpline) Open 24 hours a day
Email: via website.
Website: www.talktofrank.com

Release

They offers advice and information on drug problems. They have expertise in legal matters surrounding drugs.

Telephone: 020 7324 2989 (helpline)
Address: Release, Ferguson House, 124-128 City Road, London EC1V 2NJ
Email: ask@release.org.uk
Website: www.release.org.uk

TASHA (tranquilisers, anxiety, stress help association)

TASHA provides confidential information, support and counselling to people affected by mental health problems and problems with benzodiazepines.

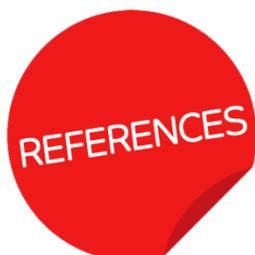
Telephone: 0207 118 4334
Address: 63 Mattock Lane, London, W13 9LA
Email: enquiries@tasha-foundation.org.uk
Website: www.tasha-foundation.org.uk

Turning Point

This is an organisation that works with people affected by drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and learning disabilities.

Telephone: 020 7481 7600 (admin)
Address: Standon House, 21 Mansell Street, London, E1 8AA
Email: info@turning-point.co.uk
Website: www.turning-point.co.uk

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¹ Royal College of Psychiatrists College Report CR158 .*Self-harm, suicide and risk: helping people who self-harm*. London: 2010, p27.

² Health and Social Care Information Centre. *Statistics on Drug Misuse*. London: 2013, p12.

³ Casadio et al. Cannabis use in young people. The risk for schizophrenia. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 2011, vol 35, p1779-1787.

⁴ Andreasson et al. Cannabis and schizophrenia. A longitudinal study of Swedish conscripts. *Lancet*, 1987, Vol 2(8574), p1483-6.

⁵ Di Forti et al. High-potency cannabis and the risk of psychosis. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2009, vol 195, p488-49.

⁶ Department of Health. *Mental Health Policy Implementation Guide: Dual Diagnosis Good Practice*. London: 2002.

⁷ British National Formulary: *BNF 69*. London: 2015, p338.

⁸ British National Formulary: *BNF 69*. London: 2015, p40.

⁹ Taylor, Paton & Wiley. The Maudsley. *Prescribing Guidelines in Psychiatry*. Wiley Blackwell, London: 2015, p 334

¹⁰ British National Formulary: *BNF 69*. London: 2015, p40.

¹¹ Cohen RS, Cocores J. Neuropsychiatric manifestations following the use of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA; “ecstasy”). *Prog Neuropsychopharmacol Biol Psychiatry* 1997; 21: 727-734.

¹² Department of Health. *Mental Health Policy Implementation Guide: Dual Diagnosis Good Practice*. London: 2002.

¹³ Department of Health. *Refocusing the Care Programme Approach: Policy and Positive Practice Guidance*. London: 2008.

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in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927
Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email advice@rethink.org

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or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback
PO Box 68795
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 10am to 2pm, Monday to Friday.



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quality of life for everyone
affected by severe mental illness.

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Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

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